FEBRUARY CLASSIS REPORT.. DISABILITY CONCERNS

During these winter months it is quite common to see a jig saw puzzle scattered out on the puzzle board. Looking at some individual pieces some seem dull and insignificant, yet they are needed to make up this beautiful picture. When the puzzle is done there are no pieces left laying around the outside of the picture, each piece fits into its place. This reminds me of the church, the body of Christ. There are areas in my life where I am weak, but those are the areas where you are strong. So we complement each other and overcome that weakness. I do not end up on the outside, on the margins, because of my weakness.

In our churches does everyone fit in or are there some who are pushed out to the margins because they are not needed (our perspective) to complete the picture? I feel, like most of us, that I am not racist, or sexist. I certainly don't push ableism. But in our unconscious bias that may not always hold true. Does **ableism** exist in our church? Certainly human nature leans very much in that direction. Let's take an open and thoughtful second look on how churches might practice ableism.

When construction is planned for an apartment building, the owners don't first go and do a survey to see if they need to install an automatic door and elevator. They put them in right from the start knowing that there may be people who will need them. Do we use that same thought when we make plans in our churches? Let's look at a few simple scenarios . A youth leader comes with lots of potato chips as a snack. What happens if someone shows up who has allergies that stops them from enjoying that snack? A teacher in the 6 year old class brings a picture suitable for each of them to colour. A visiting child shows up for who that picture is beyond their fine motor skills. The men's Bible study group decides to hold their weekly session in their homes. It's a much friendlier and cozy atmosphere than in a bare room in the church. A man in the community, has some interest in checking out this group, but he is certain that the home is not accessible for his wheelchair. Each of these scenarios start with the assumption that all who attend are able. That is ableism and there are many ways in our society where that is commonly practiced.

Each of them could avoid that practice by having options in place, not as an afterthought, but right from the start, at the planning stage. Make sure there is always a selection of snacks so no-one is left without. Pictures to colour are in a variety of skill levels. The men's group meets in a setting where there is an accessible washroom. Like the builders of the apartment building, we start of by anticipating that those with different ability levels will not only show up, but are able to fully participate.

Churches can be a welcoming place for all. This will only happen if we plan for it. When planning for programs, events, worship and activities we look at the whole picture. We anticipate and are preparing to be a place of belonging for those with physical limitations, those who are able, those with intellectual, and sensory impairments. Each of us are pieces of the whole puzzle that God has surrounded us with and each is needed to complete the picture.

These three scenarios also show us that just including some-one physically into our space, does not mean that they will feel they belong. Although it may be a good start. Belonging is relational, knowing you are wanted and needed. The circle is not complete when you are not there. It also shows that being treated equal is not always correct. We may all receive the same assignment, but it is not equitable if it is well beyond some ones skill level.

You can find out more about practicing hospitality that looks to the heart of each person. That acknowledges we want to go beyond inclusion to a place of belonging. That equity, not equality, shows the heart of a welcoming church. Go to the web site to follow interesting stories and helpful resources. https://www.crcna.org/disability Or read the easy to follow manual "Everybody Belongs, Serving Together"

We trust and pray that as we move into 2024 that our churches will strive to be a place where "Everybody Belongs and Everybody serves".

Regional Advocates..... Len and Rynie Bakelaar